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The Mermaid's Legs, The Artist's Hands, The Professor's Assumptions

Judith Beth Cohen

Imagine a college graduation held in a non-academic, woodsy retreat. As the evening light dapples the lake, the ten graduates who range in age from thirty to fifty sit before a picture window. Among today's graduates are Helen, a forty-year-old single mother receiving welfare benefits, and Pete, a disabled Cuban-American who works in the Human Resources department of a large manufacturing company. Like thousands of adults, Helen and Pete opted out of formal learning. A complex stew of damaging school experiences, parental messages, and social inequities had caused them both to reject education as they knew it. Though their missing college degree was an invisible deficit, they had each felt emblazoned with the label "dropout," as much a symbol to them as Hester Prynne's letter A was to her in *The Scarlet Letter*. As children, they were both considered bright and creative, but in adult life, that fledgling creative spirit had retreated to memory. Pete's difficulty writing standard English and Helen's resistance to classroom conventions had kept them both away from college, yet their unfinished education made their life narratives feel interrupted. (Cohen, 1996). Would life have been different if I had gone to college? Am I smart enough to earn a degree? These questions continued to plague them.

No matter how many times I have been a faculty member participating in the graduation ritual, I am nervous as I improvise what I will say to the gathering of spouses, lovers, parents, children, grandchildren, and friends. After twenty years, each ceremony is still new and each student, unique. They have shared the journey of completing college despite a complex life of work, family, and other obligations, and they all chose an unconventional way of studying. Instead of attending classes on a college campus, these students selected Lesley University's Intensive Residency Option in the Adult Baccalaureate College. For nine days each semester, they left family and work behind to travel and join a community of adult learners at a rural retreat center. Here they lived with other students and faculty under one roof. Along with studying, laughing, eating, and exchanging stories late into the night, they each created a personalized study plan that included a full semester's equivalent of course work. The pedagogy of this bachelor's program is informed by Howard Gardner's Theory of Multiple Intelligences, which includes interpersonal, intrapersonal and kinesthetic ways of knowing and meaning-making (Gardner, 1999), and interdisciplinary study and collaborative learning (Bruffee, 1993). For six months, faculty mentors guided, encouraged, and cajoled the members of their small study group. In their final semester, each graduate completed a capstone project or thesis, writing a minimum of fifty pages on a single topic. They have earned this graduation celebration.

As a writer myself, I find that each student can be as intriguing and complex as an entire novel. Through our work in the learning community, I come to know these students in a far more complete way than those I teach in regular semester classes. Because we live together for nine days, our usual roles dissolve, and we bring aspects of ourselves to the faculty/student relationship that rarely enter the classroom. During a walk in the woods with Pete, we may discuss his study plan or I may knock on Helen's door to continue a conversation begun over lunch. Early in the morning, I may join a group doing yoga before breakfast. Here my role is more layered and complex, for I am both Judith, the professor, and Judith, a community member wearing sweat-pants, fresh from a run. Though I was a veteran educator when I met them, both Helen and Pete transformed my assumptions and challenged my thinking in ways that have altered me forever. Helen shook up my view of women living "on welfare" and gave me a new reading of some literary classics, while Pete revealed to me how deeply entrenched my ideas about disability were. If not for the pedagogy of the learning community with its informal setting and the individualized student-driven nature of the curriculum, I could not have been so deeply affected by their stories. (See [endnote 1.](#))

As part of their degree work, both Helen and Pete revisited life events that had continued to cause them shame. Then, through weaving elements of their stories into their studies, they were able to reinterpret and re-author their own narratives. In the course of this process, their buried creativity began to reemerge. Educators like Maxine Greene have written eloquently about the potential of the arts for transforming thinking and promoting our understanding of difference, yet art is usually a fringe part of the curriculum (Greene, 1995). In most adult education programs, marginalization of the arts tends to be even more pronounced, for the curriculum is often designed with a "marketable" credential as the goal. Yet, in the interdisciplinary setting of the learning community, Helen, an aspiring writer, was encouraged to explore the meaning of her own creative blocks and her resistance to what she had regarded as "great literature." Pete, a management student, was able to reconnect with his abandoned passion for art and ultimately wrote and illustrated a children's book based on his own story designed to teach disability awareness. Transformed by the effort to complete their college degrees immersed in a community that welcomed their stories and encouraged their creative expression, they, likewise, had a transformative effect on their peers and their professors.

Helen's Story

Helen came to this program as a blocked writer, and by the time she graduated two years later, she had completed a collection of short stories. Though her educational journey was very different from my own, she held up a mirror to me. As I witnessed her evolution from silence to reclaiming her voice, she reflected my own history back to me. Like the fairy tale mermaid who gave up her voice and her freedom to win the prince, Helen had shut down her creative life. In her world, only men or great geniuses could call themselves artists. Through her studies, she confronted the myth she held about herself as a woman, and as I mentored her, I was able to revisit my own struggles with the family pressures that had hindered my development as a writer. Upon first learning that Helen, a white woman from a middle-class family, lived in a housing project with her biracial child and depended on welfare benefits for support, I couldn't stop the questions that popped into my mind: Why doesn't she work? Why can't her parents help support

her? My own middle class prejudices bubbled forth before I could stop them. Yet as I learned more about Helen, I had to rethink these automatic assumptions.

This highly articulate, graceful woman, comfortable with a guitar or a pen, was no media-created stereotype of the welfare mother. Like many young women from backgrounds of poverty, at the age of fifteen she dropped out of high school and ran away from home. Though Helen had two concerned, educated parents, as well as the privileges of private schools and therapy, she continued to rebel. Her story forced me to revise my unacknowledged theory that a two-parent family, cultural exposure, and good schools necessarily lead to successful functioning. As the proverbial "good girl" who did what was expected of me, I had earned degrees and become a professor. Yet, like Helen who struggled to believe that she had any creative ability, a little voice always doubted that I could call myself a writer. Helen helped me to see clearly that even well-meaning parents and teachers, who are themselves shaped by a culture that devalues girls and promotes conformity, unknowingly instill self-doubt. Under closer scrutiny, Helen's choice of becoming a dropout no longer seemed such a poor decision; perhaps it was a creative response to repressive forces.

My identification with Helen's story came as a surprise. The learning community was so unlike my own undergraduate experience thirty years earlier that we might have been living on different planets. I had sat in lecture halls, lost in a crowd of hundreds; the professor was a remote sage on the stage with whom I never spoke. During classes, I would daydream about my love life, coming awake only in rare moments when a professor's comment about a literary or historical character triggered some fuzzy link to my own experience. Whereas my own college experience was characterized by feelings of anonymity, the learning community begins with each student telling his or her story about returning to college. While my own professors had all been men, here, half the faculty and most of the students are women. While I had learned by listening to lectures, here, active dialogue and making personal connections through writing and other forms of expression are the primary educational tools. When I marched in my cap and gown, I was one of thousands in a stadium addressed by the president; here, each student is personally honored for her own accomplishments, and there are no famous speakers.

A learning community based on self-directed study may seem comfortable and cozy, but it also has its risks. As a professor, I can't rely on a preplanned syllabus; I must improvise again and again and be willing to acknowledge that I may not know the answers. Students take on a full-time college load, submit written work every three weeks, and maintain a vigorous dialogue with their mentor. They cannot become a face in the crowd. In small "planning groups," they retell their stories to peers and a faculty advisor. Through this process, I learned that Helen had grown up in an artistic household; her mother had been a dancer and her father, a writer, but with five daughters to support, they had to put aside their artistic aspirations. Still, singing, performing, and writing had sustained Helen through her stormy childhood and adolescence. After dropping out of high school, she had followed a rock band, hoping to become a performer rather than a girl groupie. Though she repeatedly found herself in the demeaning status of expendable, and sometimes battered, girlfriend, she persisted. Helen told me that she identified with the social protest music and culture of Reggae and made a deliberate decision to have a baby with her younger, African-American lover, confident that she could raise her child alone. To "go on

welfare" was another conscious choice. As she explained it, "It made much more sense for me to be home raising my son than working long hours for minimum wage. People should realize that this investment in me and my kid will ultimately be good for society. Isn't it better to have me there for him than working at McDonald's?" (personal communication).

In my world of educated liberals, integration and multiculturalism were ideas that were verbally espoused, but rarely lived. When I was single with no prospects, I had considered having a child alone, but the more I considered it, the more it seemed like a form of professional and artistic suicide. Against these middle-class values of planning for the future, completing your education, and providing for your children, Helen had made a different choice and lived with its consequences. Yet, she had a son and I was childless--Helen embodied the values she had embraced. Could I have done things differently too? Helen, now nearly forty and back in college, knew that she had to change her life and get a job; yet she was not willing to surrender her love of music and writing.

The mantra repeated at the learning community was, "Follow your passion--study what you love." Helen decided to focus her first semester's study on the question: "Why do people experience creative blocks?" Before she could pursue her own work, she felt that she had to figure out why she hadn't been able to keep her creative life alive. Just write, don't worry so much about your blocks, I thought to myself, but this was her study, not mine. In the learning community, faculty work hard to honor the student's agenda by supporting her study design.

Philosophically, we are committed to an adult learning pedagogy that espouses that questions from students' lives will hold their interest, produce better work, and ultimately lead to the same discoveries we might have suggested (Daloz, 1999; Mezirow, 1991). It's a matter of faith, but the oft-repeated advice "Trust the process" has proven itself over time.

Helen left the retreat with a plan to study creativity and creative blocks. She would read psychological theorists and artists' personal testimonies to find answers. After she submitted her first competent research paper, I could see that her academic skills were solid, but she hadn't really answered her own question. In good "procedural fashion" (Belenky et al, 1986), she had reported well on the theories of others, but she was still distant from the material, doing what she thought college required of her. The personal letter that accompanied her paper included some telling reflections on her father's attitude toward the arts: "He made us feel that artists were way above us, sort of like gods. Besides, they were all men. Who was I to think I could be like them?" For her next paper, I encouraged Helen to write about her childhood and explore how the theories applied to her own story.

"I got the message that only geniuses or the very rich could be artists," she wrote in her next essay. "My father had given up his writing to earn a living. My mother wanted to be a dancer, but she stopped so she could land a husband. I remember seeing her secretly practice when he wasn't home. As a girl, I felt it was dangerous and scary to do something creative." While writing about her childhood, Helen remembered a fairy tale that has been very important to her. In Hans Christian Andersen's version of "The Little Mermaid," the mermaid allows the witch to cut out her tongue and gives up her beautiful voice to win the love of a mortal. But the price is great--trading her tail for human legs makes every step "like treading on knives sharp enough to draw

blood." Identifying with the mermaid, Helen wrote, "I learned that to venture forth, to seek the joy of my senses, meant to pay a price. Giving up my voice and moving in pain became my path as I grew toward womanhood."

Identifying her metaphoric connection to the mermaid marked a creative breakthrough for Helen. She began to explain to herself why she had dropped out of school and why her creative urges felt blocked. This new realization helped her to disentangle herself from her parents' narrative. Though she recognized her losses, she also saw the possibility of transformation in Andersen's tale, suggesting alternative paths for her own "mermaid." She may not win the Prince, but the mermaid becomes part of something greater, the invisible daughters of the air who, through their deeds, are able to create their own "everlasting souls" (Andersen, 1959). To Helen, the story took on new meaning—pain could be overcome, and women could be effective even without mates. In Anderson's story, she even saw her own Scandinavian heritage mirrored. "I thought of my own ancestors farming those northern fields; I saw winter darkness giving way to spring and I felt connected, too, to that metaphor. I could move beyond darkness and pain."

As I watched Helen's subtle transformation, I was surprised to recognize myself in the archetypal mermaid story: for women, love requires sacrifice, it told me. Putting others first means setting aside your own creative projects. How often had I done this in my own life? When I married in the mid-nineteen-sixties, the norm was to be the woman behind the accomplished man, so I had pushed my mate to become an artist and played second fiddle to him. I remembered handing him a story I had written and waiting eagerly for his approval. Days passed before he could make time to so much as look at it. Ultimately, I was unable to pursue my own work without breaking away from that relationship. Though many years had passed since my divorce, connecting my own story to Helen's mermaid metaphor helped me to see how creatively blocked I had been. Despite our different histories, we had both carried baggage that had crippled us creatively.

Through writing about the mermaid, Helen was constructing meaning via metaphors rather than hypotheses, building from her own experience. Mezirow (1991) notes that this is a common process for adults engaged in transformative learning. Maxine Greene further argues that we often give meaning to our lives by seeing our own narrative as a form of quest (Greene, 1995, 75). When I left my own marriage, I couldn't see the quest motif because I hadn't credited myself with much sense of agency. Like many of my students, I had regarded my life as a series of accidents. In her path-breaking study of memoirs, Jill Ker Conway (1998) argues that even accomplished social activists like Jane Adams or Margaret Sanger adopt the cultural gender plot when telling their own stories and picture themselves as passive travelers rather than active agents who deliberately chart their lives. Being able to identify the cultural master narratives in our own stories allows us to critique and revise them.

As Helen's confidence grew, so did her ability to confront the "high culture" she had considered off-limits. Finally, she could take on the "great books" she had been too intimidated to tackle. She noted that "they were literally over my head" on the high bookshelves that had lined her father's study. In a critical essay on E.M. Forster's *Howard's End* (1921), Helen wrote of her identification with Leonard Bast, the working class aspirant who longs to join the intellectual circle surrounding the Schlegel sisters. Noting the irony that Leonard is accidentally crushed to

death by the very books he reveres, Helen gained another insight about her own ambivalence toward "high culture." To move beyond her parents could be dangerous, just as Leonard's class transgression had proven fatal. This recognition allowed her to take another step toward intellectual and creative freedom as she further deconstructed the unspoken gender and class barriers she had accepted. Though I loved Forster's novel and its 1991 Merchant-Ivory cinematic adaptation, Helen gave me a new reading of this work. Her words triggered images of the shelves of legal tomes in my father's law office, and I recalled my own conviction at twelve that I would become a lawyer, just like him. Then, the messages I absorbed in my 1960s high school and college classrooms made that choice seem more and more inaccessible. As a woman, bound to marry and raise children, it made sense to choose the more modest, gender appropriate career of English teacher. Thus, Helen's reading of literature gave me a new reading as well, and I saw myself reflected in another story that I had not made such a personal connection with.

In 1852, John Henry Newman argued in *The Idea of a University* that the learning process is as important as its content, and one can learn more from other students than from the formal curriculum (Sutherland, 1994, p. 42). Helen, with her self-identified tendency toward isolation and depression, blossomed in the learning community. Knowing that her peers would be an audience for her work helped sustain her through the long months of reading and writing alone, as she negotiated a new vision of herself. She returned to the community (what Roland Barthes calls a "kitchen of meaning" [quoted in Witherell & Noddings, 1991, p.7]), eager to talk about her discoveries and read her work to her study group. From her peers, Helen saw more evidence for her new theory that we are all passionate, creative people, that artistic pursuits are not the exclusive province of rare geniuses.

With the help of peer dialogue and reflective writing, Helen revised her notion of herself as an outcast with no talent. As her teacher, I had to revise my assumptions of otherness about high school dropouts and welfare mothers. From a social policy perspective, the taxpayer's investment in Helen's child rearing and education makes far more sense than a program of forced minimum wage jobs for poor parents. Helen's final project, a short fiction collection, represented the creative accomplishment she had dreamed of producing. Rather than being autobiographical, her stories focused on the housing project where she'd lived since her son's birth. She wrote of her neighbors and their struggles to raise kids in the midst of violence and drug dealing. Having done so much work with her own narrative, she could now engage with other women's stories and give these less articulate women a voice. Through Helen's eyes, I further illuminated aspects of my own story that I had never considered. The combination of a one-on-one mentoring relationship, along with the informal, retreat setting of the learning community, makes time feel suspended. With our roles less fixed and our identities more fluid, our imaginative musings can have freer reign.

Pete's Story

Pete has an obvious physical disability. A thalidomide-induced birth defect robbed him of his hands--one arm ends in a stump, the other has a constructed hand with a few stubby fingers. I first noticed Pete on the evening when students bring music, stories, or art to share with the community. He bubbled over with enthusiasm when he showed the collages he had created from

childhood images. Like many who meet him for the first time, I found my eyes drawn to his unusual hands, a natural reaction to seeing something unexpected. Almost immediately, I forced my eyes away, deliberately trying to avoid staring at his deformity. Nearly as quickly, my eyes returned to his face, as Pete's sense of humor and warm, direct manner engaged me, drawing my attention away from his physical difference. Clearly, he had taken on the job of making others feel comfortable, but he did this so naturally that I relaxed and forgot about his hands. As I came to know him better, I began to understand the enormity of the emotional burden he carried, instinctively taking care of others because he understood that his disability created more problems for us than it did for him. As the week unfolded, I felt the impact of his leadership skills when he served as the elected student "voice," a role meant to serve as liaison or spokesperson between the college staff and the students. I soon learned that Pete had moved quickly up in the corporate world, going from hotel desk clerk to recruiter for an all white manufacturing company of 3,000 employees trying to diversify its workforce.

Pete explained that as a bilingual person, he was comfortable speaking in the Latino community and was proud that his efforts had brought minorities and women engineers into his company's workforce for the first time. In addition to being the only "disabled" person in the learning community, Pete was also the only openly gay man in a predominantly heterosexual community. As educators, we often espouse risk-taking as a requisite to growth, and as a creative writing teacher, I urge students to avoid an easy resolution or a hackneyed situation. Yet knowing Pete made me view risk-taking through an entirely different lens.

Pete's family had fled Cuba after the revolution when he was a baby. Pete, who had never met his father, was brought up by his mother in the United States. She worked as a housekeeper, governess, and hairdresser to support her two children. Though visual art had been a lifelong interest of his, Pete had no formal training. At seventeen, he had applied to NYU to pursue study in art therapy, but he lacked the money to attend, so his interest in art making was put aside. Lurking in the background through thirty years of career moves were Pete's unanswered questions: Am I good enough to finish college? Dare I try to be an artist? When a friend at work urged him to look into the Residency program, he hesitated. "I felt very awkward because of speaking two languages. It was a problem for me in high school. I would mix up letters; I think I had some sort of dyslexia. I still have nightmares about a teacher telling me that if I miss one more day of school, I won't graduate."

This lingering damage from early school failure experiences also marked Helen's narrative. So many of the adults I've taught still hear those teachers' voices. Ellen Winner, who studies artistically gifted children, has noted that dyslexia is often associated with high visual and spatial abilities. These children, like Pete and Helen, are often nonconformists in school and difficult for teachers to control (Winner, 1997). Yet, when Pete attended his first residency of the adult learning community, doors began to open for him. From conversations with fellow students and the faculty, he learned that he could incorporate art into his studies and still be a management major so that his company would continue to pay for his schooling. "It changed my life," he said confidently. "I didn't know there was another world outside the treadmill. I began to see that you could fulfill the requirements and still enjoy yourself . . . I had come to get that damned degree and get out, but it began to take on a different color."

As I read the writing sample that Pete was required to submit during his first semester, in which he had seized the opportunity to reflect upon his exile from the country of his birth, I considered my own views. Being a firm opponent of our thirty-year boycott of Cuba myself, and familiar with the small country's advances in education and health care, I tended to defend the Cuban revolution. Pete's passionate hatred of the Castro regime made me want to challenge his one-sided stand. At the same time, his story helped me to see the issues from the perspective of one family ripped apart by the Cuban revolution. Because he was able to create a curriculum around his own story, he acquired a more objective, critical perspective on Cuban history. After studying the background, he was able to understand for the first time the corruption of the Batista regime, the reasons people supported Castro, and the role of the American boycott in making life so difficult for Cubans. As he reflected on his own family history, he gained a new appreciation for the role of strong women in generations of his family. After confronting a topic that had been off limits, he decided to look closely at an even more emotional issue, his absent father.

During the following semester, Pete studied Human Development by focusing on father-son relationships. To make the topic more than an academic exercise, he decided to set up a reunion with his absent father. His painful encounter with this alcoholic stranger in a Florida fast food restaurant was devastating, but despite the pain, he did not regret filling in another gap in his story. Through integrated writing that explored human development, history, and autobiography, Pete gained the confidence to take on an entirely creative project. Just as he was to begin his final semester, Pete's mother was seriously injured in an auto accident. He came very close to giving up on school, but with the encouragement of his advisors, Pete completed his degree. Combining art and creative writing with his professional work on the Americans with Disability Act, Pete wrote and illustrated a children's book called *The Boy With His Hands in His Pockets*.

"Finally, I could write about why I had always felt alienated," Pete explained. "I could share my story." Pete's protagonist, eight-year-old Joey, has the same birth defect Pete was born with.

Though his doctors and his mother urge him to use a prosthesis, "an ugly, creepy, hook-like thing," he rejects it. Instead, he keeps his hands out of sight in his pockets "until kids got to know me a little," Joey explains. He can't understand why the kids are so cruel and why they make fun of him. "If I learned to live with my hand and arm, why can't they?" he wonders.

Through Joey, Pete lets readers see the creative side of his disability. "Everything I touch was made for kids with two perfect hands, so I always have to think of different ways to use things." Joey's imagination is always at work; he finds it easy to take the perspectives of others, often noticing what they miss. Joey confides that his biggest handicap is not his birth defect itself, but the effect it has on others. "It frightens them and makes them uncomfortable."

In his book's redemptive conclusion, Joey stands in front of his class, takes the chalk his teacher hands him with his stubs, and draws a perfect figure on the blackboard. Finally, it is through art that Pete's alter ego triumphs and finds acceptance. Since his studies were driven by his own questions, Pete could excavate his buried artistic interests, reclaim his imagination, and move his interrupted narrative forward. (See [endnote 2](#).) As he put it, "Getting my degree was the best thing that happened in my life, no doubt about it. Not that it gave me expertise in management. I already had that, but it gave me a way to break the chain. I don't know where I would have been

if I hadn't come to school."

The idea that learning can transform students' perspectives can seem a slippery, even self-serving notion if all we hear are the verbal testimonies of personal conversion. Yet I have continued to have contact with both Helen and Pete for ten years following their graduation, so I can bear witness to how these changes played out in their lives. Five years after completing his degree, Pete literally managed to break what he regarded as "the chain" that held him to the corporate grind. Investing his retirement money, he opened a combination Cuban cafe and antique gallery. Always the risk taker, he had followed his passion with the courage that few of us can muster. Helen had a full-time job in a university setting and was working on a master's degree in an integrated arts program.

I remember their graduation ritual when the drab, serviceable dining room was transformed by flowers. I can still see Helen's father, the same man who was once so discouraging to her, sitting next to her son, their eyes on Helen as I rose to honor her accomplishments. I picture Pete's mother, sitting next to his lover and other family members, and lines from Pete's story linger in my head: "I learned to see things from different perspectives. Everything in my world from doorknobs to shoelaces were made for kids with two hands, so I had to see things their way as well as my own way."

How grateful I am that after thirty years, teaching has not become routine for me. Through my career, I have taught in many settings from a state college to Harvard University. I have worked with students struggling with literacy and poverty, as well as those from the most elite backgrounds, yet the learning community model stands out as the most satisfying place to teach. The improvisation required there often demands that I surrender my "own way." I must abandon the safety of the classroom and live in my body with my students. Today, when distance learning programs are making face-to-face community a relic of the past, such an interpretative community seems all the more vital. The liminal space created at the learning retreat helps nurture reflection and imagination as central to the academic process. With my students, I, too, experience what Jack Mezirow calls "a disorienting dilemma" as I challenge my own assumptions, whether they be about poverty, disability, or the Cuban revolution. As students like Helen and Pete connect unanswered questions from their personal narratives to their academic work, in the process they pick up lost threads, and create a new narrative that feels more whole. As a guide and participant, I experience anew the possibilities of transformation as the mermaid reclaims her voice, and the artist reveals his hands.

Endnotes

- 1) For an in-depth analysis of the pedagogy of the learning community, see J. Cohen and D. Piper (2000). "Transformation in an adult learning community." *Learning as Transformation: Critical Perspectives on a Theory in Progress*. San Francisco, CA: Jack Mezirow & Associates, Jossey-Bass, 205-228.
- 2) For a discussion of the interrupted narratives of other students in this learning community see:
J. Cohen (1996). "Rewriting our lives: Stories of meaning-making in an adult learning community." *Journal of Narrative and Life History* (now called *Narrative Inquiry*), 6 (2), 145- 156.

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